

How did this happen?

On August 5, an EPA mine investigation team triggered the release while excavating loose material that had collapsed into a mine entry. The excavation released pressurized water that was held above the mine tunnel, spilling about three million gallons of water into Cement Creek, a tributary of the Animas River.

What is EPA doing to respond?

EPA has deployed a large response team to Durango and Silverton, Colorado and to several locations in New Mexico, Utah and the Navajo Reservation to coordinate with affected states, tribes and communities on various response activities and to address impacts associated with the Gold King mine wastewater release.

EPA's primary objectives include working with federal, state, tribal and local authorities to make sure that people continue to have access to safe drinking water, ensure appropriate precautions are in place for recreational use and contact with river water, evaluate impacts to aquatic life and fish populations, and stop the flow of contaminated water into the watershed at the Gold King Mine site.

Why is it taking so long for EPA to release water quality data? Several other agencies/ entities have released data and have indicated that water is now safe for recreational use?

We are working around the clock to collect and analyze water quality information. Doing this work right is absolutely critical to ensure we are doing all we can to inform the public and protect health and the environment.

EPA is collecting and assessing water quality from the Animas and San Juan Rivers daily. Over the next several days, we will be jointly evaluating data and information with partners to determine when access to the Animas River will be restored for activities and uses such as rafting, fishing, irrigation, and drinking water.

While the data we have analyzed to date indicates that water in the Animas River in Colorado has returned to pre-event conditions, we must evaluate the full set of data collected through the past few days and develop an understanding of the concentrations of metals that were deposited in sediments on the river bed and banks. This analysis will ensure that any recommendations about reopening drinking water intakes and reopening the river for recreational use are based on the rigorous science we use to assess risk and ensure public health.

This is a time consuming process and we are working around the clock to generate the science we need to inform recommendations and decisions. EPA is sampling water at several locations in the Animas and San Juan Rivers for a suite of metals and contaminants. The lab work and quality assurance process for generating these data is time consuming. This effort is generating thousands of data points which must be analyzed by our scientists and then compared to risk screening levels that EPA uses to make sure public health is protected.

EPA's review of water quality data collected to date indicates positive signs regarding metals and pH concentrations in the Animas River. While that information is encouraging, EPA is continuing to review all data collected to develop a comprehensive picture of water quality conditions in the river and in the plume itself. We are committed to a long-term effort to evaluate water quality impacts to ensure that we do all we can to address the impacts of the release.

Our longer term concern is the effect of sediments over time. Because we have been working on mine-related impacts to water quality in the Animas River for several years, we have very good information and data on background levels in the river. We will use this information to assess our long-term progress in restoring the river.

What about wildlife and fish?

(Update) The assessment of impacts to wildlife and fish populations is ongoing. To date we have seen no indication of widespread fish mortality in the Animas or San Juan. Fish cages placed directly in the Animas River by the State of Colorado Division of Parks and Wildlife for two days indicate one mortality out of 108 fish tested. The State will be evaluating those and other ecological impacts with partners as we move forward. EPA is also working with the New Mexico Department of Game Fish and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to investigate reports of impacts to wildlife.

Impacts on Human Health, Drinking Water Systems/Intakes and Populations Served:

What are you doing to make sure people have clean water supplies in Navajo Country?

For Rusty or others.

How do I know if my drinking water is safe?

Drinking water intakes in affected areas remain closed and community systems are using alternate sources to supply their customers. EPA and others ? are working directly with those who have concerns about potential impacts to domestic wells. EPA will sample and secure alternate water for those affected. **Where, how many?**

How many systems have been impacted by this incident?

Which specific systems have been impacted?

How many intakes at each of these systems have been shut down?

What is the population served for each of the impacted systems?

How many people use water from the Animas River for drinking water?

When will the river be reopened for drinking water, agriculture, and recreation?

If tests indicate the water has returned to pre-incident levels, where is the divide in re-opening the river?

Discharge Status:

Where is the leading edge of the plume?

There is no visible leading edge of the plume in the lower San Juan River and Lake Powell. While water quality monitoring data will provide details about water quality in the San Juan, initial data indicates no changes in acidity levels in the River. Lake Powell is a large body of water and we expect no significant impacts to the Lake are any water bodies downstream.

Is contaminated water still being discharged from the mine? How much water is leaking from mine now, i.e., what is the current discharge rate?

Yes, contaminated water was being discharged from the mine prior to the release on August 5 at a rate in the range of 200 cfs. Discharge rates since the release have ranged between 400-800 gpm. (Check numbers and convert to equivalents) A treatment system was constructed on August X and is capturing and treating the contaminated discharge by reducing acidity and removing metals. The system is discharging water with a pH of 5, the background levels in Cement Creek are more acidic, with a pH of 3.5. (check #s)

We expect the discharge rate will vary over time, additional investigation will inform any additional remediation and help ensure that water continues to be treated before being discharged to Cement Creek.

What is the total volume discharged to date?

The spill volume associated with the release on August 5 is 3M gallons.

Impacts on Agriculture:

To what extent is water from the Animas River used to irrigate crops?

What are the impacts on the agricultural community, e.g., crops and livestock?

Have any food crops been impacted to-date from this spill?

What types of crops are grown in the impacted areas?

Background:

What was happening at the Gold King Mine the day this incident began?

What pre-incident assessment docs are available?

Is there any precedent for this type of spill?

Have there been any previous spills of this magnitude?

What is the scope of pollution from hard rock mines?

Potential Future Impacts:

- How significant of a threat do these types of mine present in the future in terms of the potential for mine waste potentially contaminating waterways?
- The Bureau of Land Management reports suggest that once sediments settle, it can take waterways years to recover, e.g., each heavy rain churns up sediment and carries it further downstream. Can EPA speak to the validity of these suggestions and what is being done to mitigate these risk?
- Will the sediments become a perpetual problem as water continues to churn up sediments during heavy rain and in areas of white water?
- What is EPA doing to protect Butte, MT's Silver Bow Creek?

What is the turn-around time on samples?

From a scientific perspective, what contaminants have been found and at what concentrations?

What is the plain English interpretation of the sampling results, e.g., is there a danger to human health from exposure or ingestion?

When EPA refers to “pre-incident” levels, to what does this refer? Where, when, and why was testing previously done and by whom?

Public Comments and Input

What number can citizens call if they have questions about this incident?

How do I know if my vacation destination has been impacted by this incident?

Financial Claims and Accountability

For what types of losses can I be compensated?

What is the process for filing a claim for financial compensation?

Who pays for financial losses to private citizens, businesses, and communities?

How many claims has EPA received?

How much does EPA expect to pay out in claims?

What is EPA doing to make sure this doesn’t happen again?

EPA has worked successfully to address environmental concerns at hundreds of mine sites across the West. We will thoroughly investigate this incident and are committed to applying all lessons learned to our work as we move forward.

While we continue to investigate the root causes of last week’s release of mining waste at the Gold King Mine in Colorado, we are instructing our Regions to immediately cease any field investigation work at mines including tailings facilities, unless there is imminent risk in a specific case. We are in the process of initiating an independent assessment by a sister federal agency or another external entity to examine the factors that led to last week’s incident. Based on the outcome from that assessment, we will determine what actions may be necessary to avoid similar incidents at other sites. While we stand down on existing field investigations and assessments at these mining sites, we also are instructing our Regions to identify existing sites with similarities to the Gold King Mine site and to identify any immediate threats and consider appropriate response actions.”

Who, specifically, is responsible for the release?

Will EPA release the names of those on-site when the incident began?

EPA staff and contractor were on site.

Will anyone be fired as a result of this incident? If so, who?

We will be investigating the full facts regarding this incident and the response and will respond based on that information.